



**VIOLENT SOCIAL CONFLICT  
AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION  
IN NIGERIA**

**What do Africans think about violent social conflict, including its causes and preferred solutions? How do conflicts affect popular support for democracy?**

The Afrobarometer introduced questions on conflict in a survey in **Nigeria** in **August 2001**. We chose to start with Africa's most populated nation because it is a continental bellwether; as goes Nigeria, as a source of either chaos or stability, so goes the neighborhood.

Since independence, Nigeria has experienced regular **incidents** of violent conflict, including:

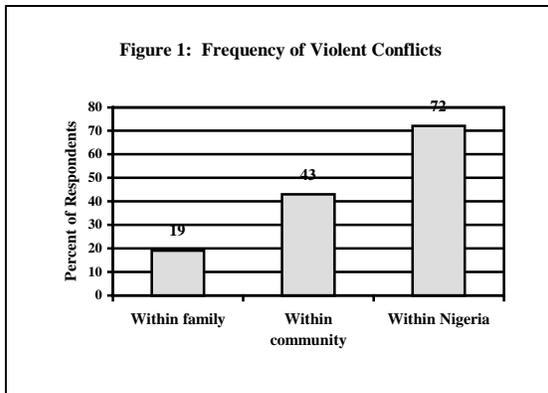
- A secession attempt by the Eastern Region and a devastating civil war;
- A festering confrontation between (Northern) military power holders and (Western) civic activists over the annulled presidential election of June 12, 1993;
- Clashes over oil revenues between the federal government and minority ethnic groups of the Niger Delta;
- Disputes over land in the multi-ethnic "middle belt"; and
- Deadly religious clashes between Christian and Muslim communities, for example in Kano and Zaria in the late 1980s, and in Kaduna and Jos in 2001 (at the same time that the Afrobarometer survey was being conducted).

**The advent of democracy** in May 1999 has not ameliorated violent social conflict in Nigeria and may even have exacerbated it. If anything, religious tensions have increased as numerous Northern states have adopted *sharia* (Islamic) law largely in reaction to the power shift signaled by the election of a South-Westerner as president. At the same time, armed militias have sprung up to defend ethnic interests (like the Odu'a People's Congress in the South West and Arewa People's Congress in the North West), and vigilante groups have taken it upon themselves to administer mob justice in various urban centers. The Obasanjo government has tended to over-react to outbreaks of instability with heavy-handed crackdowns. In this context, it is highly appropriate to catalogue the experiences with violence of ordinary Nigerians and to probe their perceptions of the best ways to resolve conflicts.

A **nationally representative cross-section** of 2190 adults was interviewed in the August 2001 Afrobarometer survey in Nigeria. All six of the country's geopolitical zones were covered (including 29 of the 36 states) each in proportion to its share of urban and rural populations, and including an equal number of men and women.

The survey found that:

**Nigerians perceive pervasive social conflict.** In their experience, serious disputes arise at three levels in society. Nineteen percent of people report violent altercations “sometimes,” “often” or “always” within their own families, 43 percent in the communities where they live, and 72 percent in Nigeria as a whole (see Figure 1).



Perhaps surprisingly, women are no more likely than men to perceive such discord, even within the domestic domain. But older people are more likely than youngsters to see national instability, perhaps because they remember a trail of disorder stretching back to the civil war.

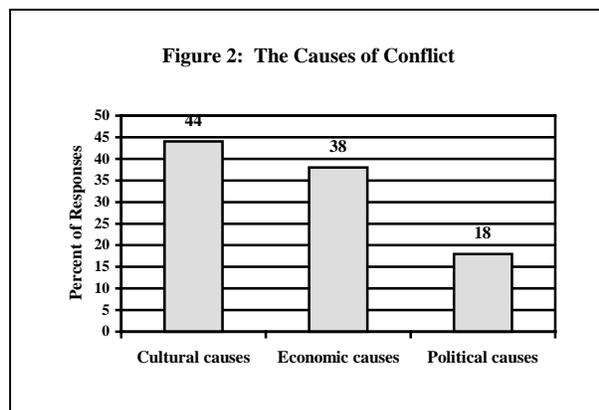
Conflicts within and between communities occur more often in urban than in rural areas. Half of the residents of Nigeria’s crowded, multicultural cities say they regularly encounter local-level violence, compared to only one-third

of rural dwellers. At the same time, local disruptions also vary by region, with Southerners being twice as likely as Northerners to experience troubles in the community. Combining these factors, the residents of the Lagos megalopolis encounter violence more frequently than other Nigerians, though the residents of the Niger Delta and the South East region are also hard hit. Importantly, fully 87 percent of Lagosians think that disorder (“katakata”) is endemic to the nation.

**Social conflicts have complex causes.** The survey asked Nigerians why, in their estimation, violent conflicts arise between communities. Respondents offered up to three responses in their own words (n = 5225). Once classified, mass opinion points to causes of inter-communal conflict that are both cultural (44 percent of all responses) and economic (38 percent) (see Figure 2).

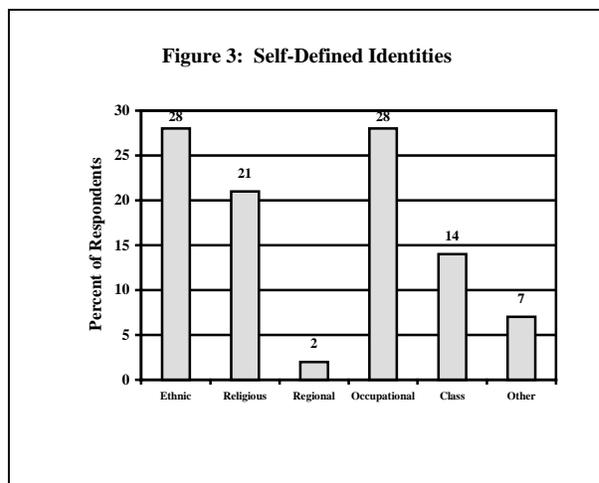
Nigerians identify religion, a cultural factor, as the most common source of strife (25 percent of all responses), in part because the survey was conducted during a period of unrest over the introduction of *sharia* law. Fully 71 percent did so in Kaduna in the wake of religious clashes there. Ethnic rivalries – including tribal, linguistic and regional differences – are cited as a secondary cultural cause (18 percent). Another 22 percent think that conflicts are most likely to arise over economic issues like boundary disputes and access to land. In many cases, as with the current land rivalries of the Tiv and the Jukun, ethnic groups who see themselves as the true *indigenes* of an area are pitted against those they consider “settlers”. In the process, cultural and economic motivations for conflict become mixed in complex patterns of perceived causation.

Fewer Nigerians attribute internal violence in their country to political sources, such as competition for office by traditional leaders, politicians or political parties (see Figure 2). Nonetheless, almost one in five Nigerians (18 percent) thinks that politically ambitious leaders stoke conflict, including by articulating, and mobilizing support around, cultural and economic grievances. Official policies requiring that state institutions have a representative “federal character,” have also tended to inflame cultural conflicts over public employment.



Whereas urbanites are prone to blame conflict on rabble-rousing politicians, their country cousins are more likely to point to divisions over land and other natural resource shortages. Regional differences are even starker: although almost two-thirds of North Westerners think that conflict arises from ethnic and religious sources (64 percent), more than half of the Niger Delta dwellers in the South South zone see an economic basis to conflict (54 percent), especially when it comes to allocating oil revenues between the federal government and the regions.

**Nigerians express both cultural and economic identities.** How do people situate themselves in a heterogeneous and conflict-prone society? The Afrobarometer finds that Nigerians define their own identities in diverse terms. We asked, “besides being a Nigerian, which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?” A slight majority replied that they see themselves mainly in terms of their culture, that is, they have adopted an ethnic, religious or regional identity (51 percent). But economic identities, which derive from day-to-day livelihoods and occupations and from perceptions of social class, are important too (42 percent) (see Figure 3).



Depending on where they live, Nigerians tend to see themselves in distinctive ways. South-Easterners are most likely to adopt a cultural identity, usually by naming an ethnic or language group (like Igbo). North-Westerners and those from North Central region also express cultural attachments, though in this case via identities based in religious communities (usually Muslim). By contrast, the residents of Lagos and the North East Region see themselves in terms of their positions in the economy, the former by expressing a class identity (like worker or unemployed) and the latter by naming an occupation (like farmer or trader).

People who adopt any kind of sub-national group identity perceive more frequent conflict than people who see themselves as individuals or who insist on being known as Nigerians. But, even as folks abandon their ethnic attachments and adopt occupational personas, they continue to conceive of conflict in similar ways. This consistency makes sense in a context where complex conflicts are not purely cultural but are also fought out over meaningful economic stakes.

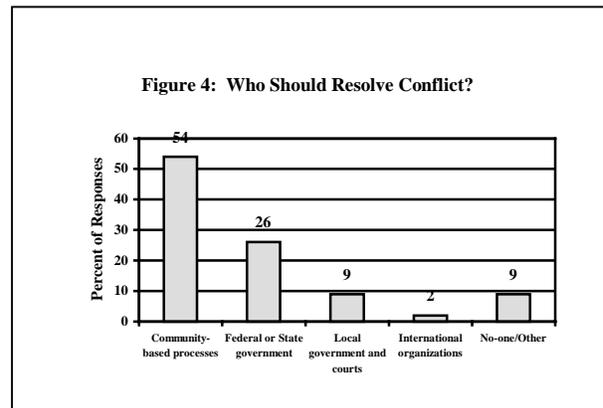
**Nigerians prefer informal modes of conflict resolution.** The Afrobarometer asked, “who would you turn to for help to resolve a violent conflict between groups in this country?” Respondents offered up to three answers in their own words (n = 6305). Taken together, these indicate that Nigerians are twice as likely to prefer an informal community-based process rather than an official intervention by a state government or the federal agency (54 versus 26 percent of all responses) (see Figure 4).

At the community level, people are most likely to turn to chiefs, headmen or elders to mediate disputes (17 percent of all responses), especially in the parts of the country where traditional leaders continue to perform customary functions. Thereafter, people request resolution from religious leaders (14 percent) such as a pastor in a Christian church or an imam in an Islamic brotherhood. Interestingly, few people seek help from civic organizations or NGOs (1 percent), which have a limited presence outside the major urban centers. In the absence of organized

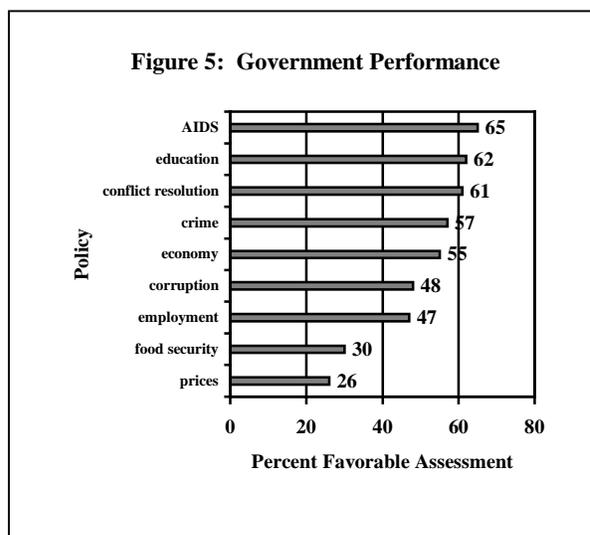
channels, people commonly resort to self-help, insisting that “the people involved in the conflict” find a solution for themselves (8 percent) or they turn to “family, friends and neighbors” (7 percent). In the extreme, they may even enlist the help of vigilante groups (2 percent).

In practice, Nigerians make little use of government as an agent of conflict resolution. When they mention the central government at all, they call on its coercive agencies – the army and the police (16 percent of all responses) – rather than on its judicial branch (4 percent). Nor do they make use of local courts or local government administration (9 percent), perhaps because they do not expect fair or effective treatment. In keeping with their pride in Nigeria’s status as an African superpower, even fewer Nigerians think that international agencies have a role in resolving internal conflicts.

Predictably, community-based solutions are most strongly advocated by rural folk; urban dwellers are more prone to turn to government. South Easterners put most faith in community organizations (62 percent) as compared to Lagosians, one third of whom would seek out an agency of a local, state, or federal government (36 percent). Not surprisingly, persons who express a religious identity tend to prefer religious leaders to resolve conflicts. More interestingly, persons who define themselves in terms of their region of origin (e.g. Westerner, Easterner) are especially likely to enlist the assistance of a vigilante group.



**Government is given good marks for managing conflicts.** Even though, in practice, Nigerians rarely choose government mediation, they gave the Obasanjo administration a top grade in conflict resolution in August 2001. In their view, the government was doing almost as well at managing conflict (61 percent favorable) as it was at controlling AIDS and improving education (see Figure 5). And public opinion held that government was doing much better at conflict



management than at controlling inflation and ensuring food security.

Against our expectations for the Niger Delta, where protests against multinational oil companies and interethnic feuds have been forcefully repressed, the government’s general handling of conflict resolution has been welcomed by an above average majority of residents (South South region = 71 percent, Bayelsa state = 88 percent). But such favorable assessments are offset in eight states where fewer than half of the people approved of the government’s management of conflicts, including in zones of unrest like Anambra and Plateau states.

**So far, violent conflict has not undermined popular support for democracy.** Persistent social conflicts have had mixed impact on the consolidation of Nigeria's fragile new democracy. The more that Nigerians perceive conflict, the less likely they are to pronounce that they are "satisfied with the way democracy works." But more than half of those who experience conflict still admit to being satisfied with democracy. Similarly, the frequency of perceived conflict increases the likelihood that Nigerians will judge the political regime as "not a democracy" or "a democracy with major problems." But, again, fewer than one in ten who have experienced violent conflict think that it precludes the possibility of building a democracy.

Importantly, the perceived frequency of conflict has *no effect* on the level of popular support for democracy, which hovers around 71 percent for everyone, regardless of their experience with conflict. If anything, there is a slight tendency for people who encounter increasing amounts of violence in the family, community, or nation to become *more* supportive of democracy. Thus, for the moment at least, Nigerians have not yet lost faith in democracy. Indeed, they seem to regard the deliberative procedures of this form of government as possibly helpful in arriving at the peaceful resolution of disputes.

**Most Nigerians value peace, reject violence.** The extent of violence in a society both reflects, and is reflected in, the political values of its citizens. While significant minorities are willing to use violence against others to obtain their goals, most Nigerians say they support universal human rights and the rule of law.

Take several examples. First, what should people do if victimized by a violent crime? While a minority of 18 percent would "find a way to take revenge", a majority of 76 percent recommend "turn(ing) to the police for help." Second, is domestic violence ever permissible? While 25 percent condone a married man "beat(ing) his wife and children if they misbehave," 72 percent think that "physical violence is wrong under all circumstances." Third, is political intimidation ever warranted? While 28 percent can foresee a situation in which force would be necessary "in support of a just cause," some 64 percent think that, "the use of violence is never justified in Nigerian politics."

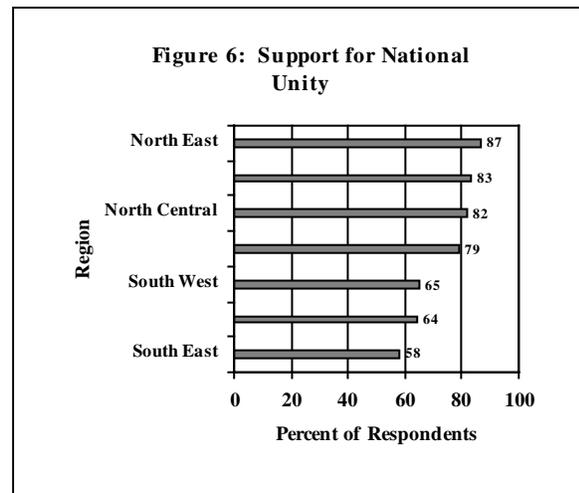
As expected, older men are significantly more likely than younger women to tolerate abuse of spouses or children. And younger men who are close to a political party, including some who may be militants, are somewhat more likely to find justification for acts of political violence.

**Most Nigerians want the nation to remain intact.** If only because they fear unknown alternatives, citizens are largely committed to the integrity of the national political community. Fully three quarters of survey respondents agree that, "even if there are conflicts among different groups, Nigeria should remain united as one country" (74 percent); only one out of five think that "the differences among Nigerians are too strong; for the sake of peace, the country should be broken apart" (22 percent). In short, most Nigerians have resolved to never again repeat the trauma of civil war.

Sentiments of national solidarity are widespread, constituting a majority in every region of the country. Nevertheless, regional disparities cannot be ignored (see Figure 6). While North Easterners have the strongest commitment to staying within the federal fold (87 percent), one third of South Easterners apparently still feel that their region would be well advised to go it alone. Indeed, with the exception of cosmopolitan Lagos, there is a marked difference (averaging some 20 percentage points) between Northerners and Southerners on the national unity question. While Northerners clearly perceive that federal arrangements work to their advantage, Southerners are much less sure.

We then asked: “suppose you had to choose between being a Nigerian and being a member of your self-defined identity group; which do you feel most strongly attached to?” On this choice, Nigerians were split exactly down the middle: 49 percent named a primary allegiance to Nigeria, whereas 50 percent would side with a sub-national group.

Importantly, the nature of group identities has a profound impact on commitments to national unity. People who adopt economic identities (e.g. in terms of their occupation or social class) are much more likely to support a united Nigeria than people who take on cultural identities (60 percent versus 39 percent). The Nigerians who are least likely to defend the national political community are those who define themselves as members of religious groups (just 33 percent) and administrative regions (just 23 percent!). Generally speaking, ethnicity is less corrosive to national unity than either religion or regionalism, since a slim majority of those who define their identities in terms of language or tribe actually support a united Nigeria (55 percent).



**In sum**, public opinion about social conflict in Nigeria is replete with paradoxes. While a majority proclaims commitment to the integrity of the national unit, one half of all Nigerians also declare primary allegiance to a sub-national identity group. Conflicts that appear on the surface to arise from expressions of ethnic or religious rivalry, turn out on closer inspection to also include struggles over underlying economic resources. And, while Nigerians give the government a good rating for its performance at resolving disputes, in practice they would rather sidestep the state in favor of informal mechanisms of mediation at the community level.

These contradictions, which appear across a multitude of sub-national groups in an extraordinarily heterogeneous society, help to explain why violent social conflict is seemingly endemic to Nigerian politics. Moreover, tensions between these groups and an extractive centralized state help to explain why anyone who seeks to rule the entity called Nigeria inevitably encounters a crisis of governability. We expect that elected leaders are more likely than military dictators to be able to resolve, without violence, at least a few of these conflicts. And, unlike in the past, the chances of conflict resolution will improve to the extent that mediators seek to understand public opinion and to take it into account.